Teaching At-Risk Students Using UDL: Cure or Curse?

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At-risk students exist in every college classroom. The common theme among these students is that they are perceived as somehow separate from or less able to succeed than their classmates. Students in this diverse group often express the feeling of being an outsider. Engaging learners through inclusive teaching practices foster a positive emotional environment in the classroom (Cavanaugh, 2016). One way to embrace the differences among collegiate peers is the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach (CAST, 2018). The use of UDL fosters collegial success through multi-modal instruction, diverse assessment approaches, and unique learning opportunities.

Keywords: inclusion, diversity, indigenous, at-risk, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), neurodiverse, non-traditional, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), dyslexia, ADHD, cultural intelligence

INTRODUCTION

Every college classroom has at-risk students. "At-risk" is a term that may apply to any student who faces a higher risk of failing than their peers. For this paper, at-risk students are students who are indigenous, neurodiverse, and non-traditional because these three groups often overlap and face unique challenges in higher education. As of 2019, at-risk college student categories in the United States included indigenous (18%), neurodiverse (e.g., students with dyslexia, ADHD, or Autism Spectrum Disorders) (19%), and non-traditional (i.e., significantly older than their peers) (69%) (NCES, 2019; UAS, 2019). Because their frame of understanding course content differs from their native, neurotypical, and traditional peers, these students may not be able to connect new learning as completely.

One issue that places these three groups in the at-risk category is the desire to improve their lives, but often being underprepared for college demands. According to Horn and Moesta (2019), students see college acceptance as a gateway to a better life. These students may not be prepared for the academic and social challenges they could experience. Similarly, colleges may not understand the need for students to feel a sense of belonging with their peers. A person's sense of belonging within a peer group is an essential factor in collegial success (Moeller & Seehuus, 2019). The use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to embrace student differences promotes inclusion and self-efficacy in the classroom and beyond. Although UDL approaches cause professors to engage in added course preparation, the rewards of inclusive teaching can far outweigh the additional time spent fosters deeper student engagement.

STUDENT CULTURE AND THE BELONGING AS PART OF SUCCESS

Students report a perception of being considered "the other," meaning that they are separate from or less able to succeed due to their background, age, and learning disabilities (Murthy, 2020). They perceive themselves as being different from native, neurotypical, and traditional peers, which places them in an invisible, yet separate group. They often experience collective loneliness experienced because of a lack of belonging to their peer group (Murthy, 2020). The student's culture plays a semi-hidden, yet vital role in their academic success because culture influences how students create meaning of their learning. The ability to relate to and belong with a peer group affects a person's success (Fitzsimmons, Vora, Martin, Raheem, Pekerti, & Lackshman, 2019) in many settings, including business and school. The ability to find shared beliefs and experiences enhances a student's learning; conversely, the absence of this commonality erodes at the student's ability to make meaning from their learning, which affects their ability to integrate new knowledge into their worldview.

BELONGING AND INCLUSION

This commonality, known as the sense of belonging, with a peer group is essential to academic success (Moeller & Seehuus, 2019). Students' beliefs of fitting in and connecting affect their identity. The students need to feel like they fit in with the group. Acceptance (or non-acceptance) with their peer group affects how they make meaning of what they are learning. When they feel like they belong to a group, if it's a class or a cohort of some sort, it creates a positive affect or emotion about learning (Cavanaugh, 2016).

One way that this concept of belonging has been integrated within the University of Alaska Southeast (UAS) is with the large and active Alaska native population, who have inclusive groups and respectful presentations. UAS also starts all traditional ceremonies and meetings with thanks to the native environment by explicitly including it and making it a large part of the university. UAS has created an overall acceptance of the differences that exist within all of their academic base, incorporating it into daily life.

Students in this diverse group often express the feeling of being an outsider, which then leads to an adverse outlook on learning (Murthy, 2020). If students perceive that they are an outsider among their peers, it leads to them feeling more negative about their chance of being successful in their education. Sometimes, students may become hostile at exclusion from their peer group. They seek others that are like them just to bond and to share experiences (Hammond, 2015). The creation of centers of inclusion, where students may find affinity groups such as LGBT youth, people of color, or women, promotes a sense of belonging to a subgroup within the college where they join others that are like them to bond and share experiences.

This need to belong is especially essential when instructing online. One way that instructors may discover undesirable conditions is that student participation may become slightly negative towards an individual or group (Hammond, 2015). It could become political, or it could become exclusionary. As an online instructor, the need to be aware, especially with the shift in the delivery mode worldwide, is to check the dynamics of group work. The instructor may see a student who all of a sudden has started struggling academically, and that could be an early indicator of something that is going on, and possibly where they are being targeted (Flowers, 2020). Instructor early and frequent intervention could promote an inclusive learning environment that helps all students. Being approachable to your students opens the door for inclusive learning and enables detailed discussion among all individuals.

Inclusive teaching practices foster a positive emotional environment in the classroom, where everyone is welcome (Morgado, Cortés-Vega, López-Gavira, Álvarez, & Moriña, 2016). Inclusive environments lead to acceptance and respect for the whole student, including cultural, age, and learning differences. Additionally, inclusion leads to a cheerful outlook about education, which makes the learning "stick" more (Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014; Cavanaugh, 2016). By using inclusive technologies, such as virtual meetings and through communication on a learning management system or another asynchronous system, instructors can enable students to break off into smaller groups and post questions that would span multiple generations, cultures, languages, or cultural backgrounds. Inclusive environments allow students to form bonds with peers and faculty by nurturing perseverance among students (Tobin & Behling, 2018). These

inclusive environments enable students to develop relationships with their peers and faculty (Murthy, 2020). Inclusive teaching promotes an atmosphere of collaborative learning about course content that welcomes cultural and individual perspectives.

Inclusive teaching also leads to more perseverance in students' educational processes because it promotes a collaborative learning environment that transcends classroom or online boundaries. At-risk students often experience disparate cultures as a barrier to their learning. An inclusive academic mindset improves learning in an inclusive context, meaning that students learn better when they feel included, and their academics overall improve (Hammond, 2015). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has three main premises: Engagement, representation, and action (CAST, 2018). One way to embrace the differences with such diversity among college students is the UDL approach (CAST, 2018).

UDL PREMISES

UDL is a way to embrace differences with diversity among college students. It involves presenting content in diverse ways to let students express their learning in ways that make sense to them (CAST 2018). It allows the learners to make more neural connections between their experiences and the knowledge and fosters an environment in which students can deliver academic content in essential ways. There are 71 learning styles, only one of which is verbal-linguistic, 70 are dyslexic by definition (Sonnon, 2013). Student engagement improves through their positive outlook about learning (Cavanaugh, 2016). Presenting content in diverse ways leads to opportunities for including the variety of student cultures, which allows learners to make the neural connections between the new learning and their experiences (Hammond, 2015). When working with atypical students, it is essential to remember that they bring a wealth and depth of knowledge with the typical students. The latter may not have had a similar experience. UDL fosters an environment in which students can express their understanding in personally relevant ways.

For example, in Alaska, a significant emphasis on subsistence living exists within communities. That information on storing and maintaining a balance with the land can be integrated into an accounting class, showing the balance sheet or the flow of goods through the system, by being able to incorporate the different cultures and values. Students from this culture not only bring a depth to the subject matter taught but also allow instructors and peers to understand the relevance of course content in the knowledge that they already have. UDL promotes a sense of comfort and belonging for students, no matter the culture, age, or learning profile. It helps to think of UDL like a house in which a person can come in through the front door, through the back door, side door, or windows. Each learner chooses the way into the learning by what is their most comfortable entry point, giving learners multiple options that promote maximal inclusivity in the learning cultural needs and education. However, the learning process includes both learners and instructors, and instructors must examine their backgrounds to see the influence on their instructional methods.

INSTRUCTORS AND CULTURAL NEEDS IN EDUCATION

An adage in higher education is to know thyself, which means that instructors need to reflect on personal aspects, including (but certainly not limited to) the following influences on their teaching practice:
- Cultural frame
- Formative experiences from childhood such as location, family life, and surroundings
- Assumptions about learning based on subjective experiences that influence teaching methods and student understanding of content

Therefore, instructors need to be aware of their backgrounds and assumptions (Flowers, 2020). A hypothesis about teaching is if individuals know enough about the material, that they will forget the beginning stages of how that information came to be, which leads to an assumption about the knowledge that students may not possess (Müller et al, 2020). For example, a nuclear physicist may go about explaining things from a physics standpoint. If the students who have not understood the basics of Newton's laws, the definitions and all of the language would be at such a different level that the students would become lost in

the information. By knowing their assumptions, instructors could consider other ways to deliver course content.

ALTERNATE PRESENTATIONS OF CONTENT

UDL guidelines presented by CAST (2018) support the idea that teaching content in alternate ways allows students to internalize their learning more deeply. Students have unique combinations of learning processes, which means that some students process learn best through auditory delivery, others prefer visual presentations, some students learn best by writing, and yet others prefer kinesthetic activities. When an instructor can include two or more diverse types of teaching methods into their course delivery, students will likely engage more thoroughly with the content (CAST 2018). For this reason, instructors should vary their educational practices to promote a more inclusive learning space.

For instructors whose students come from a variety of cultures, the imagery and language they use in their teaching are especially important (Hammond, 2015). As an example, if an instructor uses imagery based on white culture, but the students are not all white, the images will not resonate well with them. In this case, the instructor would need to alter the imagery so that students say, "Hey, that person looks like me, and I can learn." To align with UDL guidelines, an instructor would need to use images from their students' cultural frame of reference to promote an inclusive learning environment and student engagement.

CULTURAL VS. ACADEMIC INTELLIGENCE

Cultural intelligence is different from academic knowledge. Cultural intelligence (CQ) involves being aware of differences among people and being able to blend them within the learning environment (Müller, et al., 2020). For example, CQ is enough when an individual brings about their knowledge of herbs and their experience of living off the land for a class comprising students from a culture in which that type of expertise becomes valued. When connecting CQ information to academic practice, instructors could bridge the gap and allowing those individuals to see that cultural information can apply to an educational standpoint. Culturally intelligent individuals typically score higher on the learned information later, since there are deeper bonds of knowledge within their brain (Hammond, 2015). The fluid intelligence brings this information from the cultural and the academic, forming a new connection and balance that the individuals can bring moving forward through their academic and intellectual careers so that they value their cultural knowledge and can incorporate it in an educational setting.

Moving from academic intelligence to incorporate it with cultural values and students' existing knowledge allows them to build on what they already know and synthesize the pure academic learning within the frame of reference of their lives (Rodriguez, 2016). That leads to a culturally responsive class because students can then connect on a personal level with the content, but it requires intentional design and more preparation. For example, taking a course taught in southern California and delivering it the same way at a college in another region such as Alaska would require significant cultural integration for students to integrate it with their prior knowledge. Similarly, adjusting a traditional accounting course to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities requires considerable adaptation to students to succeed within the frame of their educational needs. These are situations in which UDL principles promote inclusivity and successful attainment of learning outcomes while promoting cultural awareness.

UDL: CURE?

The inclusion of UDL guidelines requires the willingness to adapt the curriculum to meet learners' needs. It increases engagement for students by respecting student needs (Morgado, et al., 2016). It uses multiple engagement methods, including traditional classrooms or online classrooms. It has interactive approaches for using online tools, such as game-based, learning like scenario-based learning and discussion platforms. It offers other options for students to prove their understanding in ways that makes sense for them (Cavanaugh, 2016). For example, using game-based knowledge such as a competitive stock-market

simulation or any of the multiple learning games available creates an environment in which various modes of learning allow students to succeed on their terms.

UDL allows students to apply their interests to an educational format, and the likelihood of their success increases dramatically (CAST, 2018). Involving students' unique interests fosters cultural inclusiveness and promotes collaboration with their peers in places like Alaska (Flowers, 2020). A typical example in Alaska is that no village lives alone. It is vital to ensure a village will make it through the winter. The connectivity to generations within a household allows students to take their knowledge of cultural importance and bring the academic experience together to strive and succeed further than they would with only one or the other.

Additionally, using autonomy and culturally inclusive learning allows students to communicate in ways most suitable for their learning profile (Morgado, 2016). In terms of a learning disability standpoint, for students who have dyslexia, asking them to write a five-page essay about a topic may not allow them to demonstrate their knowledge in the most optimal way. However, if given the option to do a verbal or audio-visual presentation could enable students with dyslexia to feel recognized in the best way that they learn and to increase their interest in the learning and performance of their knowledge (CAST, 2018). The remarkable part of the application of UDL to these diverse groups is that students learn about other perspectives (Rodriguez, 2016). So, people who live in Connecticut or Alaska would likely have wildly different worldviews. Still, they could learn from each other about the ideas of winter preparedness in Alaska versus the same concept in Connecticut. That type of cultural exposure brings in a different vantage point that can help another student about how they can bring the information in by expanding on the information presented from differing viewpoints (Flowers, 2020). However, preparing an inclusive situation as described requires intentional preparation.

UDL: CURSE?

Preparing an inclusive classroom using UDL principles can be more complicated than it appears. Challenging personal assumptions can be unsettling for anyone, and especially so for instructors. It requires the willingness to challenge an innate comfort zone and to experiment with new instructional practices (CAST, 2018). Learning about other cultures requires an open-minded approach (Hammond, 2015), and integrating it within your curriculum requires deliberate attention to students' needs. Devising alternative teaching practices and student performance measures take time, especially with an online platform, to find different ways that students can deliver their learning and demonstrate their mastery of the knowledge it takes effort. Developing an inclusive class requires increased preparation time, which may be challenging to find in an already full daily schedule. Anything that brings students to a point where they have the proficiency in the subject while including intergroup differences requires time and effort. Instructors also should know they may need to make further alterations to teaching or assignments when new student needs emerge.

CONCLUSION

A significant percentage of college students are at-risk of educational failure because of cultural, age, or learning differences (NCES, 2019). A sense of belonging with peers is a vital part of student engagement and learning effectiveness. Inclusive class design, using UDL principles for a welcoming learning environment, is more conducive for long-term memory retention and maximization of the information contained in classroom experiences. The preparation for a UDL course requires self-reflection and open-mindedness on the teacher's part about what content they need to teach and intentional design about how they will present it in an inclusive environment (Müller et al., 2020). Creating a culturally responsive class requires intentional design, added preparation, purposeful review, and the realization that UDL, especially for at-risk students, is not a stagnant process. However, the results of the labor involved in creating this type of inclusive learning space will far outweigh the effort. In the end, fostering enhanced opportunities for student success in the educational environment are worth any challenge.

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